

House of Commons HESA Child Health Study

UNICEF Canada Submission

September 2022

Introduction

Do children in Canada have everything they need to be healthy? In the most recent UNICEF Innocenti Report Card on overall child well-being in high income countries, Canada ranked 30th out of 38 peer countries, despite having the 15th largest economy.¹ While these Report Cards look at a wide range of indicators across many aspects of childhood, many pertain directly or indirectly to child health. This is because child health is an indicator of the health of the social, educational, economic, environmental and health systems in which they live, and deficits in these systems tend to show up in children's health and health indicators. In Canada, gaps in social protection policies are particularly wide: they cover fewer children or provide less coverage than policies in many peer countries. These policies have a major influence on children's health status. This Standing Committee study on children's health is a timely one, and UNICEF Canada welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission.

Every child has the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health.² Childhood itself is also a primary determinant of health, and adverse experiences in childhood can have acute, chronic, cumulative, and latent effects on health across the lifespan. The current generation has experienced an unprecedented disruption to childhood as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the effects of that disruption can be expected to “ripple” across life outcomes for years and even decades to come. Children have not been a priority for public policy for many years, nor in the political response to the pandemic.

Recommendation 1: UNICEF Canada recommends Canada develop a comprehensive strategy for children's rights and well-being to improve child health outcomes and mitigate the worst impacts of the global pandemic and concurrent crises on children and their futures.

A child rights approach is required to improve child health in Canada now and into the future. Canada lacks the child-sensitive governance structures that other countries use to keep the situation of children visible to decision-makers and to protect and promote children's rights. Countries that have such structures have better results across many areas of child well-being, including health. In many countries, these structures also allowed decision-makers to consider and act to protect the interests of children in the midst of the global COVID-19 crisis.³

For children, a strong foundation for lifelong health from the start includes a trifecta of “family-friendly” policies: a) income support (poverty alleviation); b) early learning and childcare, and; c) parental leave. A fourth policy intervention to which Canada's government has already committed partnership is the development of a National School Food Program. Specific recommendations concerning these policy areas are included in this report.

Health is Every Child's Right

Every child in Canada has the right to be healthy, and their ability to be healthy is directly tied to their full range of fundamental rights articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Canada has recently completed its combined 5th/6th review by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child,⁴ which provides concluding observations on the progress made by governments to implement the Convention in Canada. The Committee, informed by a wide range of stakeholders across

Canada, provided both structural and programmatic recommendations pertaining to child health, including that Canada:

- I. “[e]nsure that all children who live in Canada have equal entitlement and access to public health-care services, despite immigration status;”⁵
- II. “[p]romptly address the disparities in health status of Indigenous children, African-Canadian children, children with disabilities, children living in remote or rural areas and children in alternative care;”⁶
- III. “[s]trengthen mental health services and programmes for children [and] invest in addressing the underlying causes of poor mental health and high prevalence of suicidal behavior among children;”⁷
- IV. “[s]trengthen measures to ensure that children with disabilities, in particular in Indigenous communities, have access to available, accessible and quality health care”⁸ and;
- V. “strengthen sexual and reproductive health programmes and services to all adolescents.”⁹

The concluding observations make further recommendations addressing the lack of child-sensitive governance structures in Canada, and echo our recommendation of a comprehensive strategy for the implementation of the Convention across all levels of government. Ultimately, UNICEF Canada considers the various recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child to be interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

Recommendation 2: UNICEF Canada recommends Canada adopt the full range of recommendations provided by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in their Concluding Observations of Canada’s combined 5th/6th review.

Recommendation 3: UNICEF Canada recommends Canada draft legislation to incorporate the Convention on the Rights of the Child into law.

Recommendation 4: UNICEF Canada recommends the establishment of a Children’s Commission or similar independent mechanism to monitor the state of children and their rights at the federal level and help ensure that their interests and views inform decisions affecting them.

Recommendation 5: UNICEF Canada recommends the adoption of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) to help ensure due diligence and a duty of care to children in policy development across all federal departments.

Child Well-being and the Determinants of Child Health

There is a clear consensus that a broad array of experiences contributes to child health, and that childhood itself is a determining factor in key aspects of health across the lifespan. For instance, children’s material security (including income and food security) and school experiences (including pressure to succeed and bullying) strongly affect their physical and mental health. A comprehensive view of their well-being across different dimensions of life is crucial to understanding their health status and the responses that will improve outcomes.

UNICEF Canada has developed a Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being,¹⁰ which aims to track changes in child well-being in this country through 125 indicators across nine dimensions of childhood. Most of these indicators are sourced through the federal government and its funded research, but no publicly available dashboard or report presenting these data in a coherent manner existed before the creation of the UNICEF Canada Index.

Recommendation 6: UNICEF Canada recommends the adoption of the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being or a similar framework of indicators as the baseline measurement for a comprehensive child rights and well-being strategy per Recommendation #1 in this submission.

Policies for Healthy Children

The simplest and most powerful explanation for Canada's poor performance in the UNICEF Innocenti Child Well-being Report Card is Canada's shortcomings in social protection or "family-friendly" policies for children and families: income benefits to alleviate child poverty; childcare; and parental leave. Overall, despite recent advances, Canada spends less on these policies as a percentage of GDP than many of its peer countries. Despite a notable increase after 2015, Canada's investment in family policies is still less than the 2% GDP average among rich countries in the OECD, reported as 1.62% in 2018.

While work is underway on the Canada-wide early learning and childcare plan, key improvements to further reduce child poverty and get every infant off to the healthiest start are recommended below, given their powerful capacity to improve child health:

Income Support (Poverty Alleviation)

Children have unique experiences of poverty, and are affected by it in different ways, more acutely and for longer than are adults. Childhood poverty has been demonstrated to have clear linkage to health outcomes across the lifespan. The Canada Child Benefit (CCB) is a well-designed income support policy that serves multiple policy objectives, but still leaves an unacceptable number of children living in poverty. Canada has the policy tools and resources to end child poverty. Leaving children in poverty is a choice.

Recommendation 7: UNICEF Canada recommends the introduction of a Low Income Supplement to the CCB for the lowest-income households with children, adequate to lift every child out of poverty and above the low-income level by 2030.

Recommendation 8: UNICEF Canada recommends that child poverty-specific targets and measures and equity dimensions are included in Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Federal Quality of Life Framework.

Parental Leave

Parental leave time upon the birth of a child positively affects child health and broader well-being. During this time, critical things happen to help ensure a good start for infants. Parents have the

necessary time to bond with their young children, whether born to them or adopted, and to meet children's critical health, nutritional and developmental needs. Protecting this time increases the rate and duration of breastfeeding; infant vaccination rates; and the frequency of family doctor check-ups. It is in turn associated with lower infant mortality and better early brain development. Evidence also suggests that paid parental leave can contribute to the prevention of family violence and lowers rates of maternal depression and stress.

Before the pandemic, more than 30% of all Canadian mothers (and 60% of low-income mothers) outside Quebec did not receive maternity and parental benefits. Put another way, more than one-third of infants are excluded.

Recommendation 9: UNICEF Canada recommends that every child have the entitlement of no less than 6 months (26 weeks) of protected time with a parent or primary caregiver from birth, regardless of employment status. This should be available with a universal floor of non-taxable pay equivalent to the national average earnings.

Healthy School Food

A fourth opportunity for investment in child health is the development of a National School Food Policy and Program. To date, Canada is the only G7 country without a national school food program. Yet one in five children is food-insecure and at least one in three goes to school without having had a meal. A well-designed National School Food Policy should prioritize health equity and ensure every one of the estimated 5.5 million school-aged children across Canada has access to at least one healthy meal every day.

Canada has committed to the development of a National School Food Policy and Program in Budget 2022 and in Ministerial mandate letters, but has not yet begun to allocate the committed \$1B over 5 years. While the National Program will ultimately be cost-shared, federal leadership is required to establish principles and contribute funding for the equitable design and function of Canada's school food programs.

Recommendation 10: UNICEF Canada recommends that the federal government convene all key stakeholders – including provinces, territories, Indigenous governments, municipalities, experts, civil society organizations, and children and youth – in the next six months towards the development of a National School Food Policy grounded in the principles of universality, health equity, environmental sustainability and the best interests of the child.

Conclusion

The recommendations in this submission have been informed by analysis of global best practice research, our work with children and youth in Canada, and our collaborations with researchers and across civil society including the Inspiring Healthy Futures (IHF) agenda; Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty; the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children; and the National Alliance for Children and Youth. The IHF agenda alone reflects the experiences of and evidence contributed by more than 1500 participants across Canada, and UNICEF Canada fully endorses the IHF submission and those of our various other collaborators to this study.

About UNICEF Canada

UNICEF stands for every child, everywhere. UNICEF is the world's farthest-reaching humanitarian organization for children. Across 190 countries and territories, and in the world's toughest places, we work day in and day out to defend children's human rights and a fair chance to fulfil their potential, guided by the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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Endnotes

1 UNICEF Innocenti (2021). Report Card 16: Worlds of Influence: Understanding What Shapes Child Well-being in Rich Countries. Florence. Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Report-Card-16-Worlds-of-Influence-child-wellbeing.pdf>

2 Article 24, Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Treaty no. 27531. Available at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf

3 UNICEF and the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (2022). State Measures on Children's Rights during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Multi-country Impact Assessment. Retrieved from: <https://enoc.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ENOC-UNICEF-CRIA-Synthesis-report-April-2022-final.pdf>

4 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2022). Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth reports of Canada. Retrieved from:

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/CAN/CRC_C_CAN_CO_5-6_48911_E.pdf

5 Para.34(a) Ibid.

6 Para.34(b) Ibid.

7 Para.35(a)(b) Ibid.

8 Para.33(d) Ibid.

9 Para.36 Ibid.

10 UNICEF Canada (2019). The Candian Index of Child and Youth Well-being: Baseline Report.

Retrieved from: <https://oneyouth.unicef.ca/en/child-and-youth-well-being-index>